

Can Bangladesh build a democracy that listens?

Tahsina Nasir
is a PhD student at Georgia State University, US.

TAHSINA NASIR

In a quiet village in Bangladesh, an elderly woman sits on a bamboo stool, her eyes half-squinting in the afternoon light. Around her stand a few men, one holding a phone camera, another asking the same question over and over: "Who gave you electricity? Who built these roads? Who made your life easier?" Their tone leaves little room for hesitation. After a few uncertain pauses, the woman says the name they seem to expect. The men smile, satisfied that her words will make a convincing video. That short clip soon travels beyond her courtyard, shared across social media as proof of development. But for those watching closely, it says something much larger about the way politics and power often operate in our time. The old woman speaks, yet her voice does not seem entirely her own.

Scenes like this are not about a single candidate or party. They are part of a larger culture that has slowly shaped the language of democracy in Bangladesh. Electricity, roads, and infrastructure have become central to our idea of *unnayan*, or development. These achievements matter, and no one would deny their importance. But the way they are spoken about often turns them into a script rather than a dialogue. The citizen becomes a recipient, not a participant. When the question shifts from "What do you need?" to "Who gave you this?", democracy turns into a performance.

This is where Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?", becomes deeply relevant in today's reality. Spivak was not suggesting that marginalised people are silent, but that the structures around them decide how and when their voices can be heard. In other words, the poor, the rural, and the unrepresented often speak, yet their words pass through filters

Spivak's terms, she is not voiceless, but her ability to speak on her own terms is denied. When political campaigns rely on such imagery, they often reduce development to a spectacle rather than a lived reality. The woman's coaxed gratitude becomes proof that progress has arrived, yet this very gesture hides the deeper questions that define what real development means. True development is not only about electric

These are the quiet, everyday measures of development that never make it to campaign videos or banners. When citizens are asked to utter only lines of gratitude instead of sharing these realities, development turns into performance, and the people it claims to serve become invisible.

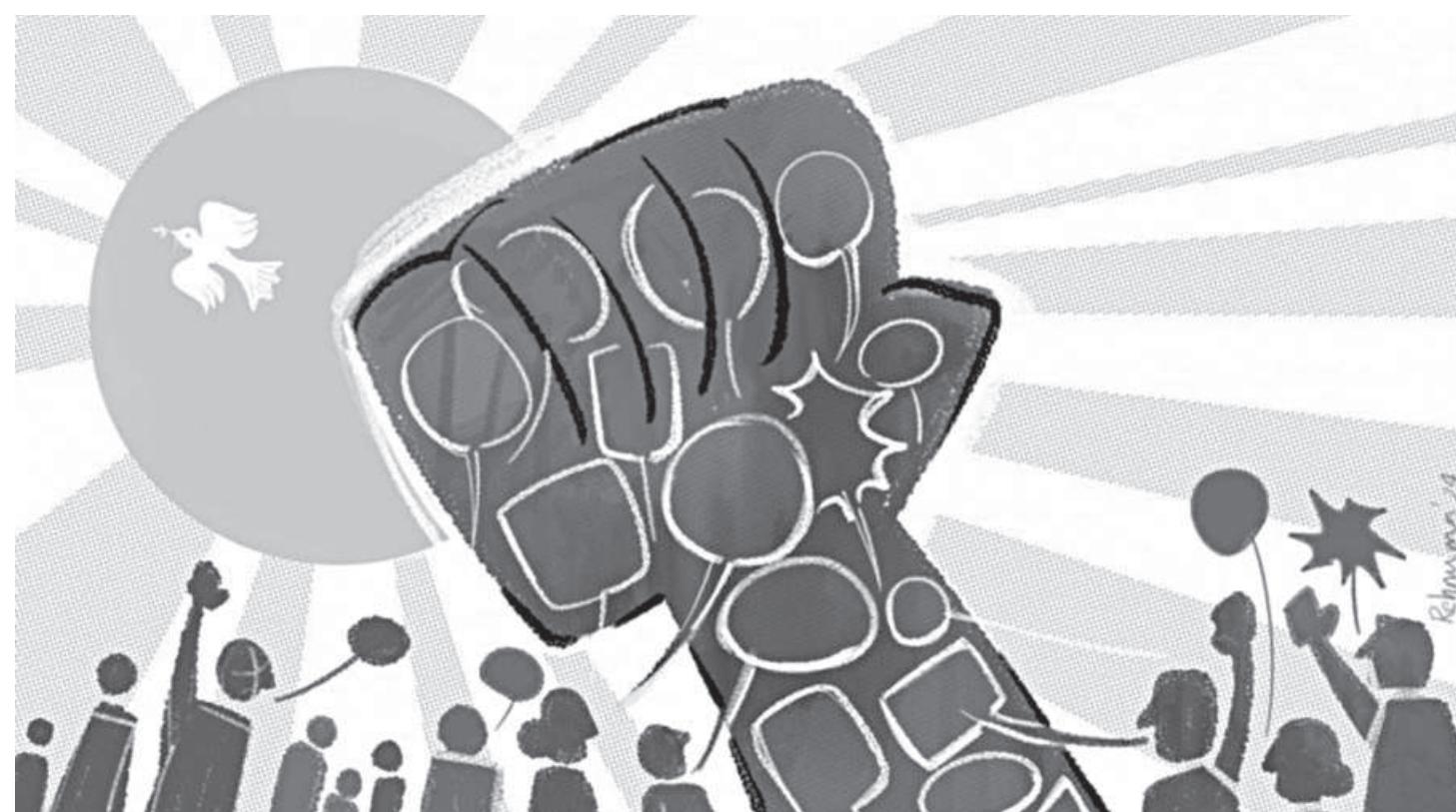
The habit of turning people's lives into symbols is old. South Asian political culture has long been shaped by patronage, by the

voice" to the marginalised, we often end up speaking for them instead. The same happens in rural politics when a villager's story is edited into a campaign reel. Her words are there, but their meaning is framed by others.

It is tempting to think of these issues as harmless, but they shape the moral fabric of how we see citizenship itself. When development is presented as a favour rather than a right, it creates an expectation of thankfulness. The citizen's role becomes to validate, not to question. Gratitude replaces accountability. And once that shift occurs, even the idea of asking for better healthcare or fair wages begins to sound ungrateful. A more humane form of politics would look different. It would begin with listening, not prompting. It would treat the rural woman not as proof of progress but as a participant in defining it. It would ask her what electricity has changed in her life, what remains undone, and what her priorities are. It would acknowledge that people know the shape of their own needs far better than those who seek to represent them.

In this sense, democracy is not the art of being praised, but the discipline of listening. Listening is not a weakness; it is a responsibility. It requires time, humility, and a willingness to hear about discomfort. It also demands that those in power accept that true development is not measured by the number of projects completed, but by whether those projects answer real human needs. The woman in that video deserves to be remembered not for whom she named, but for what her hesitation revealed.

As Bangladesh approaches the national election in February, it might be worth reflecting on what kind of democracy we wish to practice. One built on rehearsed gratitude, or one grounded in real conversation? Progress cannot only be something done for the people; it must also be shaped by them. Development is not charity, and citizenship is not a favour returned. The real strength of democracy lies not in how loudly the leaders speak, but in how deeply they listen and how thoroughly they follow up.



FILE ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHON

of hierarchy, expectation, and power. By the time those words reach the public, they have already been reshaped to fit someone else's story. The old woman in the video appears to be speaking freely, but the moment is carefully arranged. The camera, the questions, the tone—all frame her voice in a way that confirms a message already written. Her agency becomes partial, her speech turned into a symbol of endorsement. In

poles or paved roads; it is about whether that electricity stays on during storms, whether a family can afford the bill, whether the road connects a village to a working market, or whether it simply ends at a political boundary. It is about whether the local health complex has medicine, whether the flood shelter has clean water, whether the schoolteacher shows up every morning, and whether a widow's stipend arrives on time.

idea that the leader gives and the people receive. Over time, this vertical relationship became a familiar rhythm of our public life. The modern campaign has incorporated the viral clip, but the structure of power remains unchanged. The citizen still appears through the lens of gratitude rather than agency. Spivak's theory reminds us that representation can become a form of containment. When we claim to "give

What socialist Mamdani's victory means at the heart of capitalism

Dr Abdulla A Dewan
is professor Emeritus of Economics at Eastern Michigan University (US) and a former physicist and nuclear engineer at the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission. He can be reached at aadeone@gmail.com.

ABDULLAH A DEWAN

When New York City—the world's billionaire capital and command centre of a \$55 trillion market economy—elected a democratic socialist as mayor on November 4, 2025, it stunned observers worldwide. Against the odds of a bruising, multimillion-dollar campaign bankrolled by billionaire patrons, voters chose conviction over capital by a large margin. The tremor of victory reverberated far beyond America's borders. Zohran Mamdani, a 33-year-old state assemblyman and son of Ugandan-Indian scholar Mahmood Mamdani and Indian-American filmmaker Mira Nair, defeated political heavyweight Andrew Cuomo to become the first South Asian-American Muslim mayor of New York. For a metropolis long synonymous with Wall Street capitalism, his triumph was more than a political upset—it marked a moral turning point, a redirection of the city's compass from profit to principle.

Mamdani's ancestry traced a remarkable arc across continents. His forebears migrated from Gujarat to East Africa as traders under British rule. His father, Mahmood Mamdani, was among thousands of South Asians expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin in 1972, later rising as one of Africa's leading post-colonial thinkers. His mother, Mira Nair, born in India and educated at Harvard, became an acclaimed filmmaker. Their son was born in Kampala in 1991, moved to New York at age seven. Before entering politics, he worked as a housing counsellor, helping tenants fight eviction—an experience that inspired his campaign slogan: *Housing is a human right*.

He joined the Democratic Socialists of America and entered state politics in 2020, quickly becoming a voice for tenants, workers, and transit users. His mayoral platform was unapologetically progressive: fare-free buses, rent freezes, universal

childcare, and a gradual rise of the minimum wage to \$30 by 2030—financed through higher taxes on corporations and millionaires. Critics called it utopian; supporters called it humane. What sounded radical in the citadel of finance resonated with ordinary New Yorkers exhausted by inequality and living costs. When ballots were counted, the city that shelters more billionaires than any other had chosen a candidate who rides the subway and speaks for wage earners.

In a world where identity and religion often dominated discourse,

In the age of inequality, Mamdani's victory offered a glimpse of what could become a new social contract: capitalism tempered by conscience. The challenge was immense. If he failed, conservatives would claim vindication; if he succeeded, he could redefine progressive governance for a generation.

Mamdani's message of economic fairness and dignity of labour found cross-ethnic appeal. That shift held lessons for Bangladesh, where faith and faction often eclipse justice. Dhaka's realities echoed New York's in miniature: rising rents, congestion, and widening income gaps. The recent eruptions of labour unrest in Gazipur and Narayanganj over wage disparity were reminders of what happens when grievances fester. If the world's richest city could debate rent justice and free public transit, developing

cities could too—adapted to local realities.

Mamdani's grievances resonated across nearly every great city—from New York and Los Angeles to London, Dhaka, and Chattogram—where residents face soaring rents, stagnant wages, deteriorating public services, and a growing sense that political power has drifted far from ordinary lives. His campaign captured a universal discontent: the widening gap between prosperity on paper and poverty in practice. What New Yorkers ultimately voted for was not just a new mayor, but a new moral compass—one that spoke to the anxieties of an urban generation long priced out and politically abandoned. His ascent marked not only the political awakening of a generation but also the rebirth of faith in democracy's promise: that power must serve people, not the privileged few. Mamdani's victory signalled a revolt against despair, inequality, and the politics of spectacle. Cities like Dhaka, Chattogram, Nairobi, and São Paulo—all facing the same divides between privilege and precarity—could find in New York's transformation a mirror of their own struggles and hopes.

To declare oneself a socialist in New York had been an act of both courage and faith—faith that democracy could still humanise capitalism. Whether Mamdani would deliver remained uncertain. City budgets are constrained, union politics complex, and corporate lobbies resistant. Yet, his election itself marked fatigue with the creed that markets alone guarantee prosperity. The 2008 financial crisis, pandemic inequalities, and the housing collapse had exposed capitalism's moral deficit. Mamdani's victory did not erase it, but it revived the conversation about what an ethical economy should look like.

For Bangladesh, the lesson was equally urgent. Growth without equity breeds discontent; equity without fiscal discipline breeds instability. The test for any democratic socialist—whether in New York or Dhaka—is to engineer fairness without undermining efficiency. Compassion had to coexist with competence. Bangladesh's export-led growth had created wealth but also a class divide between owners of capital and workers who

generate it. Mamdani's policy ideas—stronger tenant rights, wage justice, and investment in public services—illuminated the same structural questions Bangladesh faced, though on a vastly different scale.

His rise also broadened the definition of immigrant success. For decades, the diaspora's triumphs were measured in business or science, becoming engineers or doctors. Mamdani introduced a new archetype: the public servant guided by ethics rather than accumulation. His victory showed that moral conviction, not money, can be a form of power. For young Bangladeshis abroad, this was quietly revolutionary. It legitimised political engagement and civic responsibility as paths of honour, not merely assimilation.

The global meaning of Mamdani's ascent lay in its paradox. The son of refugees and intellectuals now governed the city that symbolises global capitalism. A child of colonial and post-colonial displacement now presided over a financial empire whose logic once displaced people like his ancestors. That reversal

challenged the old geography of power—the idea that wealth, wisdom, and leadership must flow only from the North to the South.

In the age of inequality, Mamdani's victory offered a glimpse of what could become a new social contract: capitalism tempered by conscience. The challenge was immense. If he failed, conservatives would claim vindication; if he succeeded, he could redefine progressive governance for a generation.

The implications stretched far beyond America. For developing nations, the debate he reigned—how to balance growth with fairness—remained the central economic question of the century. Wealth without justice breeds unrest; justice without growth breeds paralysis. The equilibrium between the two is the essence of sustainable democracy. Mamdani's attempt to find that balance in the world's most capitalist city became a political experiment worth watching.

For Bangladesh, engulfed in struggles of inequality, youth frustration, and urban hardship,

Mamdani's story carried both inspiration and warning. His victory signalled that rhetoric without results would erode faith in reform. Despite opposition from powerful donors, party elites, and a chorus of establishment endorsements—including that of President Donald Trump—voters refused to be swayed. They looked past the political choreography and chose authenticity over affiliation, conviction over calculation.

A video clip by MSNBC shows The New York Times managing editor Carolyn Ryan saying that Mamdani's appeal is "reminiscent of Trump" for the way he "made people feel seen and heard," capturing the emotional undercurrent that drove voters to defy establishment endorsements and side with conviction over calculation.

His rise reflected a deep yearning for representation that transcended labels—a politics grounded not in ideology but in empathy, charged with the emotional voltage of affection, where people felt recognised rather than managed.

Dhaka Bus Rapid Transit PLC

Road Transport and Highways Division
House No.-04, Road No.-21,
Sector No.-04, Uttara, Dhaka-1230
www.dhakabrt.gov.bd

DHAKA
LINE
TRANSFORMING TRAVEL

Memo: 35.06.0000.007.18.004.23-1017

e-Tender Notice No.:01/2025-26

The tender notice for procurement of **Outsourcing of Manpower for Dhaka Bus Rapid Transit PLC**, e-GP Tender ID No. 1168212 is published in e-GP website. This is an online Tender, where only e-Tenders will be accepted in e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. To submit eTender, registration on e-GP system (www.eprocure.gov.bd) is mandatory. For more details contact e-GP Help desk.

SL. No	Package No. and Tender ID	Name of Works	Tender Publication Date & Time	Tender Security (Tk.)	Tender Last selling Date & Time	Tender Closing Date & Time	Last Date and Time for Tender Security Submission
01	DBRT/2025-26/Outsourcing/01 Tender ID: 1168212	Outsourcing of Manpower for Dhaka Bus Rapid Transit PLC	06/11/2025 09.00	150000.00	26/11/2025 16.00	27/11/2025 14.00	27/11/2025 13.30

Date: 05 November, 2025

GD-2346

-S/D
General Manager
Dhaka Bus Rapid Transit PLC
Tel: 02-48957784
mohiuddin.dbrt@gmail.com